

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 316. The First Abolitionist

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This episode discusses the horrors of slavery in the Caribbean during the 18th century. Some of the details are very graphic and may be upsetting, particularly for younger listeners, so please do be warned. Thank you.

For want of dwelling near enough to the blessed truth,
I was leavened too much into the nature of the people there,
which are masters and mistresses of slaves.

Though I never had nor would have any of my own,
but by conversing trading and living daily amongst them,
where there is vast numbers, abundance coming daily to buy goods and to beg, some to steal,
we had abundance stolen from us at times, the worth of 10, 15 or near 20 shillings at a time,
come into the shop, hold robes together, lay the scheme, I suppose, come by appointment.
When many a come in, they seem in great haste. One would say,
serve me another, serve me, serve me, come sometimes by twilight and within night,
then was their time. So when we were in a hurry, one would run away with one thing,
one with another, and so on. Very much we lost, to be sure. Sometimes I could catch them,
and then I would give them stripes sometimes. But I have been sorry for it many times,
and it does grieve me to this day, considering the extreme cruelty and misery
they always live under. Oh, my heart has been pained within me many times to see and hear,
and now, now, now, it is so. So Tom Holland, that very moving reading is from
All Slave Keepers That Keep The Innocent In Bondage Apostates by Benjamin Lay,
which was printed in 1737 in Philadelphia. It was printed by, I read from you in your notes,
none other than Benjamin Franklin. It was. And Benjamin Lay, who is much less well known
than Benjamin Franklin, he is the subject of today's podcast, and we are celebrating him, aren't we,
Tom? A man short in stature, but great in impact and great in heart, I think.

Great in heart. He was the world's first, or you're claiming he was the world's first abolitionist.
I'm not actually claiming that. Rowing back from the title within three minutes of the podcast.
As regular listeners will know, you're a great one for the dramatic title that doesn't necessarily
correspond to the theme. So Benjamin Lay, as you said, he is very, very short of stature.
He was four feet seven inches in height, according to one of his biographers. He was also a
hunchback.

When he grew older, he had a kind of very long white beard, so very striking appearance, kind of
very unusual appearance. And as you say, isn't really a kind of great name to play with. He grew
up in Essex. So initially, your first attempt at reading that was in an Essex accent, but it became
Australian. Abandoned. You abandoned that. Yeah, thinking white stilettos, white stilettos and a
white van, but it all fell apart. So he ended up traveling from Essex to Barbados in the Caribbean
and then to Philadelphia and Pennsylvania in the 18th century. So he was born in 681, died in 1759.
Tom, that reading, so you chose that reading. I got about halfway through it and I thought,
I have no idea what's happening in this, in this reading. He's describing when he's in Barbados
and he and his wife, who interestingly was also similarly about four foot high and also a hunchback.

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So one of the chances I have to know whether they'd met on a dating app or who knows, they had moved to Barbados and they ran a business and starving slaves would come in and basically would shoplift. Right. And Benjamin Lay is describing how they would do this and then how in his anger he would whip them. So he says, he would give them stripes and then how he became crippled with guilt by this and mortified by it. And he ends up deciding that slavery as an institution is wrong and arguing this very, very early on in what becomes the great kind of firestorm of abolitionism that sweeps the Anglo-American world in the 18th century, culminating in British abolitionism and then in the long run, the American Civil War. And so, I mean, he's not the first abolitionist. So we talked about Las Casas, Bartolome Las Casas in the 16th century, who essentially, because he's thinking of the world

in terms of human rights, this idea that every human being is created equally in the image of God and therefore has God given rights, which becomes a kind of fundamental part of Catholic doctrine. He comes to the conclusion that slavery as an institution is wrong. There are Protestants in late 17th century England who come to the same conclusion. But Benjamin Lay is a kind of very striking example, I think partly because his appearance is so striking. But also, as we will see, I think you might legitimately describe him as the first activist, perhaps rather than the first abolitionist, because he makes the case that slavery is wrong with a series of stunts that I think will be very familiar to people from the kind of things that Extinction Rebellion are getting up to now and so on, things like that. So I think he's a really fascinating example and he focuses attention on the questions that we have kind of discussed tangentially several times over the course of the podcast and that has often been raised in the discord, which essentially is the question of if the tradition of abolitionism is emerging from a specifically Christian context, which I think it absolutely is, why is it so late? So why is it not until the 17th and 18th century, how are Christians justifying having slaves and how is it that around the 17th and 18th century, certain Christians are coming to think that the whole institution of slavery is wrong? Okay. Well, let's start with Benjamin Lay himself, Tom. So he is born in 1681. And as people would have guessed, if they'd only been treated to my original opening in that excellent accent, he's from Colchester. In Essex, yeah. In Essex in the southeast of England. So tell me a bit about his background. So his parents are Quakers. Right. And he's born, as you said, in 1681. So that's absolutely within living memory, the incredible convulsions of the Civil War in England, and the Republican period that had followed that. So the rule by Cromwell. And one of the things that marks Cromwell's period in power is a relative degree of tolerance towards a wide range of Christian sects. Yeah. And, you know, there are large numbers of these that that emerge in this period, say the Ranters and the Fifth Monarchist Men and all that kind of. The Muggletonians. The Muggletonians. The sect that emerges in the 1650s that has the most enduring impact and that is still very much around today are the Quakers. Yeah. And their origins are much more kind of radical and unsettling for their contemporaries in the 1650s than they come to be. They come kind of relatively speaking to be tamed. Yeah. But in the 1650s, they're recognizably part of this sense of the world turned upside down. And their very name Quaker, it kind of alludes to this sense that they are shaking, that they're trembling, that they're bellowing, that they're kind of frothing at the mouth, that they're crying out at their meetings. And so it's a bit like the Ranters. Yeah. The Ranters have gone, but the Quakers survive. And the thing about that's evident about the

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Quakers right from the beginning is that they reject kind of institutional frameworks, so priests, pastors, people who claim a particular authority over their flock. Yeah. And so although it's associated with the name of George Fox, who is kind of traditionally named as the founder of the Quakers, that's not actually accurate. Basically, there are lots of people who kind of emerge at similar points, similar places, and they coalesce to form a kind of recognisable group of people. So these are people who, as it were, they're at the furthest possible extreme of the kind of the Puritan, I don't know, semi-Republican radical, I suppose is the right word, the radical movement in the 1640s and 1650s that has flourished in the ruins of Charles I's kingdom. Yeah. So they are at the radical edge of the radical Protestant Reformation, and their radicalism is expressed in various ways. So one of them, and I think in the context of our story, perhaps the most important, is the idea that the spirit is within them and that this spirit is a kind of fire. So there's an early Quaker called Robert Turner, and he says that the Lord moved his good spirit in me, and his word came unto me, which was in me as a fire. So the Quakers have, obviously they have scripture, they have the Bible, but what matters is not just the objective reality of what's printed on the page, but the way that you understand that with this kind of spirit within you, the fire of the Holy Spirit, enables you to penetrate to the kind of the hidden depths that otherwise would be hidden. And this is why Quakers boast that essentially Catholics, Anglicans, even Presbyterians, have priests, they have elders, they have people in authority, but the Quakers don't have that, they're unmediated, their relationship with the Bible is absolutely unmediated. Yeah, one to one. Yeah.

It's one to one, and it's the feeling that is rising up within you that enables you to interpret it. There are other ways as well that will also be very influential on Benjamin Lay in his long-term campaign against slavery, which is that the Quakers are committed to a sense that all humans are absolutely equal, not just because they've been created equally in the image of God, but within the fabric of society, that no one person is better than the other. So they reject all titles, they reject any claim that men might have to a kind of superiority over women, so kind of a very radical sense of gender equality, their very austere in their personal habits, which is a crucial part of what makes them influential almost immediately. People see them as kind of saintly figures, and they are very, very into expressing these views through a kind of activism. So the famous thing that they do is refuse to take their hats off. That is unbelievable. That's an absolutely shameful behaviour, Tom.

Shocking subversion of everything that...

Well, actually, you know what? I mean, we're joking about it, but if you're in the 1650s or the 1660s, not taking your hat off is a big deal, isn't it?

Completely shocking.

Completely shocking.

And Alec Ryrie, who's a brilliant historian of Protestantism, wrote a wonderful book about it, he tells a story of a servant girl called Elizabeth Andrews, who is, you know, she works in the house of Lord Newport. So he's not just, you know, he's not just her social superior, he's an aristocrat. And when she is serving guests at table, she refuses to curtsy to them. And the guests are kind of more amused by this, I think, than outrage. I mean, it's so shocking that they can't even be offended by it. It's like she turned over no clothes on or something.

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Yeah, well, we'll come to that in a minute. And they offer her 20 pounds to curtsy. I mean, that's a hell of a lot of money in the 17th century.

And she refuses. And she says, I doest not do it, for all honour belongeth to God. So she turns down 20 pounds, refuses to curtsy. Now, you mentioned the nudity. Quakers in the 1650s are quite into nudity.

You amaze me.

And they're doing this, not like the atomites, who are also part of the swirl of the religious times, who were doing it because they say, you know, you should try and get back to the primordial innocence before the fall. Quakers are doing this as a kind of activist stunt. So they are saying that they're doing it to highlight the way in which priests, prelates, presbyterians are hypocrites and that they are stripping off their clothes to kind of demonstrate the way in which. They should be stripping off the priest's clothes, really, I would have said. But anyway, there you go.

Well, but also it's targeting Cromwell. So there's a Quaker in 1654 who walks through the streets of Oxford, absolutely naked. And he's doing this to make a kind of visual prophecy that in times very soon Cromwell will be sprit of his.

That's, I mean, you know, my visa and Oliver Cromwell, he is not a man, I imagine, that would in a million years walk through the streets of Oxford naked. Is he?

No, but he is quite tolerant of the Quakers because he is because, you know, I said that there's a kind of a radical gender equality by the standards of the age. So women are as ready to preach this message as men. And one of them walks into his private quarters in Whitehall. Clothed or unclothed?

Clothed. Right. But she sits down next to next to Cromwell. She kind of bursts into his bedroom, sits down next to him, calls him a dung hill. And then basically spends an hour haranguing him, urging him to become a Quaker and Cromwell to give him credit. I mean, he sits there and this, you know, here's her out and then has her escorted very politely out. So there's no, no kind of comeback. That's nice. And amazingly, there's another another woman who's a former housemaid. She goes to America. So she's one of the very first Quakers to arrive in America. Yeah. And she's treated very, very badly by the Pilgrim Fathers out there. So the Puritans in New England. She's whipped and then she's deported. So what she does is she goes to, she crosses, she goes back to Europe and she, she goes to, to meet the Sultan, the Ottoman Sultan.

Correct. She meets him at Adrianople. I can't see the Ottomans caring for being addressed by naked people, calling them dung hills. Well, again, the Sultan is much more, like Cromwell, is much more tolerant than the Puritans in New England. Here's her out. And the woman says that he was very noble unto me. So there is, I think, a sense in which people are willing to, whether it's Cromwell or the Ottoman Sultan, are willing to, you know, these people are so extraordinary that they're almost, you know, you, they're almost kind of figures of fun, perhaps. But so earnest, so brave, mixed in with that is a sense that they are to be respected. But having said that, Quakers can go too far. So the most notorious example of that is 1656, a Quaker by the name of James Naylor, who gets so carried away with this sense that he's possessed by the Spirit that he actually identifies with Jesus. And on Palm Sunday, he simulates Jesus as his entry into Jerusalem, you know, with people laying down palms in front of him. He does it into Bristol. So Casting Bristol is the new Jerusalem. And this goes down terribly badly. And although Cromwell doesn't approve of the fate that's visited on him, he suffers horribly.

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So he has a red hot iron kind of goes through his tongue, leaves a hole in it. He has B branded on his forehead for blasphemous. He does two years hard labor. So the Quakers are kind of steering close to the wind. And sometimes the horrible things happen to them. But what happens in the wake of the restoration is that that kind of that spirit fire, if you want to put it like that starts to fade. And so Benjamin Lay is born into a world where Quakers are a good deal less radical in their kind of public manifestations of the spirit than they had been. But the thing about Lay is that he kind of holds true to that primal sense of radicalism, where his parents were a king. They were. And he's they seem to have been a direct influence on him. So tell me, you said he was short. He's four foot seven. And he has a very large head. And he's a hunchback. And he stands in a peculiar manner. Is that right? Sounds like frankly, a slightly camp manner. Yeah. So a description of him that was written by a man called Robert's Vokes, writing in the early 19th century, who was an abolitionist in Philadelphia and a Quaker, wrote a biography of Benjamin Lay that most of our information about him comes from. And he says, yes, he was hunchbacked with a projecting chest below, which his body became much contracted. His legs were so slender as to appear almost unequal to the purpose of supporting him, diminutive as his frame was in comparison with the ordinary size of the human stature. A habit he had contracted of standing in a twisted position with one hand resting upon his left hip, added to the effect produced by a large white beard that for many years had not been shaved, contributed to render his figure perfectly unique. Right. So a striking figure. And his parents are humble. So he's an autodidact. So he works variously as a shepherd, as a glover, works in agriculture, works as a sailor. And in the course of one of his voyages, he visits Syria. He could have met up with that Quaker, woman who went to Constantinople. Well, it's a bit later, several decades after that. But all the time, as Quakers do, he is reading and reading and reading. And his sense that the spirit is on him is informing his reading. So he loves Milton. He said typically he said to present to George the first with one of Milton's tracts. So obviously, the idea of presenting a king with Milton, who was a famous defender of regicide, is of course, very Benjamin Lay. But also a German king whose English is famously not very good. I mean, he's not going to be dipping into Milton. Right. So that's probably why he got away with it. Yeah. Yeah. And Benjamin Lay feels that the Quakers, maybe 50 years after they'd first started appearing, are starting to become a bit presbyterian, a bit Anglican, in that they're starting to get a hierarchy of elders. Oh, they're selling out. They're kind of selling out. And he's very opposed to this. And he starts to disrupt Quaker meetings, objecting. And Vokes has this description of this. He says his temper was violent, but it was always excited for mercy's sake. And in behalf of those who dared not assert their own rights. So you can imagine he would be a nightmare on Twitter. Yeah. He'd be throwing cans of soup over paintings and stuff. All that kind of thing. Yeah. All that kind of thing. And basically, the Quakers get fed up with him. And he gets expelled from their kind of various meeting places. And you might think that this would be terrible because he's now on his own. And what's he going to do? Well, the answer is that he meets this woman called Sarah Smith, who, as I said, is also a dwarf, also a hunchback. And they get married, and the pair are absolutely devoted over the course of their life. So that's nice.

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She is the great rock that she builds his life. And the pair of them set up as drapers in Colchester. But it doesn't seem to have gone well. And so they decide that they are going to make a new life for themselves by going to Barbados. So they do this in 1731.

That is a hell of a big leap. Colchester said to Barbados.

Yeah, it absolutely is. Especially because by this point, he's about 50.

Yeah. So, you know, I mean, that's quite a step to take.

So things must have been, we can surmise from that, that things probably went very badly for the drapery trade in Essex in the 1720s for him to make such a radical break. Anyway, he goes to Barbados. Of course, he would know before he went there that there were lots of slaves in Barbados, wouldn't he? I mean, it wouldn't be, that's not a secret. Of course, everybody knows that. Yeah. So Barbados in the 18th century is about as close to hell on earth as you can imagine. And we think of it now as tropical paradise and all that kind of stuff. But by the 18th century, it's long since been stripped of all its native vegetation. And it's been turned over to the growing of sugar. And the problem with this is that what you have with kind of rotting sugar stalks, you have, you know, great vat of water everywhere for the processing. And you have all the warm bodies of people who are laboring there. This is absolutely perfect breeding ground for the Egyptian mosquito that breeds yellow fever. So essentially to be on Barbados is kind of a death sentence. And so the corollary in turn of that is that people who go there and who work on it almost invariably die. And so how are people, how are plantation owners going to get the workforce that they need to produce the sugar that is the basis for all their wealth? And so as everyone knows, the solution to this is to start importing slaves from Africa. So the Portuguese and the Spanish should use slaves on their sugar plantations in the late 15th, 30th, 16th century. And I guess by this point, it's just become completely globalized and industrialized, hasn't it, as a process.

And I think Barbados is kind of, it's entirely given over to it. Because it's smaller say than Jamaica. And so therefore the concentration of suffering is all the greater. And basically, by the time that Benjamin Lee goes there, there are about 9,000 Europeans, but there are 70,000 Africans who obviously are enslaved. And it takes Benjamin Lee a bit of time fully to appreciate what the implications of that are. I mean, initially, the thing that horrifies him is that a wild hog kind of roots in his garden. And so he kills it. And the shame of this makes him a vegetarian. So...

Mason Krikey

Yeah. So that's kind of the initial focus of his feeling of guilt. But then he cannot help, but be aware of the suffering and the horror that underpins the wealth of this colony that he has come to to make money from.

Mason Krikey

Yeah. Because he's gone there to work as a merchant in the harbor or something, hasn't he?

Mason Krikey

Yes. So the money that he is hoping to make ultimately derives from the suffering of the African slaves. I think it's important that people know what was going on in these plantations. So I don't want to shy away from the detail. But having said that, what I'm about to describe is listeners should be warned. It is absolutely revolting. And so if you're of a disposition to find such things too upsetting, then please don't listen to it. And particularly if you have children be warned. So I guess it will take about four minutes. So that warning given, here

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we go. So the only way that these 9,000 Europeans can keep order with many, many times their number as slaves is with spectacular displays of cruelty. And so they have to be public. This is the whole point. So slaves who are rebellious, who are in fractures, who try and escape, they are executed not just publicly, but with the aim of inflicting as much pain on them as possible. As a deterrent. Yeah. So they might have their limbs broken on a wheel. You know, that might take hours. Others might be very, very slowly roasted. Others might be put into a cage and hung in the marketplace and they just slowly starve to death. The corpses of the dead slaves are then mutilated with the aim of encouraging slaves not to commit suicide, because the risk that slaves will commit suicide is absolutely an issue for slave owners. When a slave is sold, it has to be specified that they're not prone to committing suicide. Why would the mutilation of somebody's corpse after death deter them from committing suicide? Because the dream of many Africans who've been brought to the Caribbean is that after their death, they will be able to return to Africa, their spirits. Whereas if they've been mutilated, they can then can't go back. Okay, understood. So this is the thinking, this is the thinking of why the slave owners are doing it. And this has been going on for a long time. So as early as 1654. So that's during the Commonwealth period under Cromwell. There's a French priest who reports how an English slave owner in Barbados had whipped a slave until he was all covered in blood. And then it's horrible detail that he cut off one of his ears, had it roasted and forced the slave to eat it. Oh, God. Yeah. The degree of sadism and creativity, the creative sadism is so horrifying. And probably the most notorious articulation of this is not actually in Barbados, but in Jamaica and happened a generation after Benjamin Lay was in Barbados with a slave owner called Thomas Thistlewood, who's notorious. Yeah, very famous. So his notorious punishment is what he called Derby's dose. So Derby was a slave that he owned. And he wrote this journal and you can read it on the 28th of January, 1756. Thistlewood wrote, had Derby well whipped and made Egypt, he was another slave, shit in his mouth. This was because Derby had been stealing and eating sugarcane. Right. A few months later, he's caught eating cane again. And Thistlewood records that he had Derby well flogged and pickled, then made Hector shit in his mouth. So pickled as they put vinegar on the wounds. Yeah, awful. Yeah. And then, unsurprisingly, Derby tries to run away, gets recaptured. So Thistlewood gave him a moderate whipping, pickled him well. So again, as you said, made Hector shit in his mouth, immediately put a gag whilst his mouth was full and made him wear it for four or five hours. Okay. Yeah. So again, he kind of describes how slaves are hanged, ears are cropped, nostrils are slit, marks are put on both cheeks. It just goes on and on and on. Again, there's slave runs away, he's tried, he's executed, after which Thistlewood gets the head back and, in his own words, put it upon a pole and stuck it up just at the angle of the road in the home pasture. So this basically is what leads the Marquis de Sade, who is a great connoisseur of cruelty and believes that moderns cannot rival the genius of the ancients, so the Persians and the Romans for inflicting suffering and horror and torture on people. But he says the only people in the modern world who can compare with the Persians or the Romans for their mastery of cruelty are the plantation owners in the English Caribbean. And so this is the world that Benjamin and Sarah Lay come to. Benjamin amends so concerned about the sufferings of other creatures that, as I said, when he sees it, when he kills a pig, he's shamed into becoming a vegetarian. The impact on him, of what he sees in Barbados, will serve to change his life and, perhaps,

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you might say, prove hugely influential on the course of abolitionism.

I was about to say change the world, Tom, but you're not as tabloid as I am.

It's slightly excessive.

Yeah. Right. Well, come back after the break and we'll continue with the story of Benjamin Lay.

The poor blacks would come to our shop and store, hunger starved, almost ready to perish with hunger and sickness. Great numbers of them would come to trade with us for they seem to love and admire us, we being pretty much alike in stature and other ways. And my dear wife would often be giving them something for the mouth, which is very engaging. You that read this may be sure in their deplorable condition. So that's Benjamin Lay, who we were talking about in the first half, remembering his shop in Barbados. So Tom, they've moved to Barbados, Benjamin and Sarah

Lay. And I'm assuming that, like probably a lot of people in Britain, they knew that obviously, that there were slaves in the Caribbean, but the enormity of it, the horror of it was just a blank to them. They just didn't appreciate and they get there and then they realise, in their own words, they're in a base of barbarity and ill-got wealth. So do you think that dawns on them gradually or do they realise basically not long after they've got off the boat?

So Benjamin Lay, obviously initially, as was evidenced by the passage you read right at the start of the show, is kind of torn between indignation that slaves are coming in and shoplifting, which is why he uses the whip on them and then is crippled with guilt about this, but also starts to realise that they're starving, which is why he and his wife start to give food where they can. And he has a very vivid description about throwing food for the slaves out into the streets. And he says, stinking as to be sure it was, yet the poor creatures would come running and tearing and rending one another to get apart in the scramble of that, which I'm sure some dogs would not touch. So that obviously is a manifest, you know, the fact that these slaves are starving is something that he's started to become very upset by. But it's a few months before he sees for his own eyes the horrors that slave owners, among whom are Quakers, are perfectly capable of inflicting on their slaves. And so there's one particular day he goes to visit a fellow Quaker who owns a plantation outside Bridgetown, the main town in Barbados. And he and his wife, they walk up to the house and they find a naked African who is suspended outside their friend's house. And blood is dripping from the slave's body. And it's formed a puddle in the dust. And obviously this is drawn flies. So they're swarming around the blood and they're swarming all over the slave's wounds. And the lays are appalled by this and confront their friend. And the friend doesn't feel he has anything to be guilty about. You know, he says the slave misbehaved. He's my property. He has to be punished.

And it's this, I think, that sets lay upon the path that leads him to think that it's not just that slaves should be well treated, which I'm imagining was his previous position, but that slavery itself is utterly wrong. And that it's this that leads him in the long run to write tracts on which he's drawing on his memories of what he saw in Barbados. So he describes slavery

as being a kind of lingering martyrdom that could last, you know, years and years and years. And the martyrdom, some above ground and some underground in caves and dens or mines are murdered by working hard and starving, whipping, racking, hanging, burning, scalding, roasting and other hellish torments, very sorrowful to consider. And he says that everything that is

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produced by slave labor, of which sugar is the principal product, he says that it is irrevocably polluted in his words with grease, dirt, dung and other filthiness, as it may be limbs, bowels and excrements of the poor slaves. So that's a metaphorical, that sugar is, you know, you cannot put sugar into your tea and not taste the blood and sweat of the slaves who tended to the plantations, but also literally physical. So this is something that the marketer side also picks up on in a tone very different to Benjamin Lays, it has to be said, that slaves will lose their limbs, you know, the grinding of the cogs and the machinery that crushes the sugarcane, they are endlessly losing their limbs, they're endlessly falling into the contraptions, their body parts are literally part of the sugar. And so Benjamin and Sarah Lay turn abolitionists. And I think that the reason for this is partly the industrial scale of the horror that they're witnessing. It's this that makes them abolitionists, because Britain is starting to industrialize. And so the ability to inflict inflict torments on slaves is greater than it's ever been before. It's the scale of it, it's industrial scale of it, that is the horror. They can't dismiss it as a few bad eggs, you know, a few sadists, because they know that it's an industry. But also slaves, I mean, have always been part of human history. And but what's different is that the institutionalization of it has never been on quite the scale before. So it's perhaps the difference between an abattoir in a farm and an industrial abattoir. You're more likely to become vegetarian if you go to an industrial abattoir than if you watch a butcher kind of kill a cow or something. Exactly. The other aspect of it is that slavery in the Caribbean is racialized. So that wasn't obviously the case even in the 1650s, lots of white people are transported to the Caribbean, lots of Irish people particularly, but not Scots as well and some English are taken to the Caribbean. But over the course of the decades that have followed that increasingly the workforce is black. Yeah. And that again is offensive to not just to quakers, but essentially to Christian sensibilities, because if there has been one core Christian doctrine, it's that all human beings are equally created in the image of God. And so that imposes quite a lot of strains on Christians who want to believe that black people are destined by their nature for servitude. And this is one of the things that over the course of the 18th century obviously feeds into Christian abolitionism. So not just for the quakers, but evangelicals as well. Undoubtedly, this is something that the lays feel very strongly. This horror at the industrial scale of slavery, the racialized quality of slavery in Barbados is what enables the lays to feel that the spirit is illuminating their understanding when they read scripture and read there that God wants slavery abolished. Because notoriously, the Bible does not say that at no point does the Bible ever condemn slavery as an institution. But the point is that Benjamin lays understanding of how the spirit manifests itself and how it enables people who have the spirit to understand scripture means that that isn't a problem. He can read scripture and absolutely feel that it is written there that God is against slavery. Because the fire that burns in him tells him that basically, the Holy Spirit always ever. Yeah, absolutely. And so this by a few months after they've arrived in Barbados is what gives them the certitude that they must oppose slavery in Barbados, which is such a pitch that they end up being driven out of Barbados by the slave owners. Well, I was about to say, I mean, I'm guessing that they are not popular dinner guests, dinner party guests among the slave owners of Barbados. No. So they get driven out of Barbados. And rather than go back to England, they decide to go to a city that has been founded by a Quaker. It's Philadelphia,

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the city of brotherly love. And they think, well, there, surely, we will get a hearing. And they go there and they discover that in Philadelphia, as in Barbados, there are whips, there are chains, there are slave markets, and they're appalled by this. The Philadelphia then, of course, part of the British world. This is decades before the American Revolution. Absolutely. And they discover that there are lots of, obviously, there are lots of Quakers in Philadelphia. The Lays are appalled to discover that most of them think, again, that slavery is absolutely fine. And so they're so appalled by what they find in Philadelphia that they moved to a nearby town called Abingdon, which is just outside Philadelphia. And there, they launched themselves into a career of activism. So what they do, and this, I think, will seem incredibly modern. And perhaps we should bear in mind that, basically, people have not been doing this. It's so common now. But what the Lays do is that they boycott anything that might have been procured at the cost of another creature suffering. So they continue to be vegetarian. They make their own clothes. They drink nothing but water and milk. They live entirely on vegetables. They're basically vegan. Right. Cracky. In exactly the way that, you know, vegan activists today would boycott all kinds of things. I mean, in the 1730s, this is astoundingly radical. Yeah. Really, really radical. Then 1735, Sarah dies. So they've been there about four years. And with her death, it seems to have unleashed Benjamin. He becomes increasingly radical in his protests. And he is, you know, he's firing off the equivalent of blog posts, tweets, Facebook messages, all kinds of things. So endless tracks. He produces one against products that are dependent on forced labor. So sugar, obviously, but tobacco as well and tea. Right. So this would be very like people opposing. I mean, he wouldn't use an iPhone, for instance. Yeah. Because he would say that that's been produced by the result of slave labor, that the metals that have gone into it. He'd be very against anything that might be contaminated by Uighur labor, anything like that. I'd be concerned, Tom, to be brutally honest, whether he'd be a listener to this podcast. Well, I hope he would. Maybe he'd be vain enough to listen to this. Let's be frank. He'd be listening for you and not for me. Probably. I mean, I can't. There's no way of escaping that. Well, so he's against capital punishment. Right. Well, I'm against capital punishment to be fair. Anyway, this isn't about me. It's about him. And he's absolutely against slavery. So this is when he publishes all slavekeepers that keep the innocent in bondage apostates that Benjamin Franklin publishes. Right. So that's what we began with. Yeah. So Benjamin Franklin is in Philadelphia. He's working as a publisher, close friend of Benjamin Lay's supporter. But even Franklin has slaves. And so Benjamin Lay has to kind of, you know... So he's holding his nose in working with Benjamin Franklin, is he? Well, Franklin is a friend. Franklin is sympathetic. It would be like the human right to activist who has an iPhone. You know, you could be as progressive as you want. But it's very difficult, I guess, in today's economy to use things that are not in some way implicated in other people's suffering. I mean, that's the huge problem that Benjamin Lay is fighting. His take on this is much, much more radical than that of others. And he has to kind of draw people's attention to it because it's not obvious to people, even to people like Benjamin Franklin, even to Quakers. So this is why he starts adopting increasingly radical stunts.

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So as part of his campaign against tea trade, he takes a set of expensive China into the middle of Philadelphia and just drops it, smashes it. And that China is... I mean, this is a big deal in the mid-18th century.

Massive deal. Yes. Massive deal. In the dead of winter, he stands outside a Quaker meeting house with no coat, with one of his shoes off. And when passerby's come up and worry about the fact that he's going to get a cold, he says that slaves are made to work outdoors in winter dressed as he was. So that's why he's doing it. And I mean, very shockingly, he kidnaps the child of slave owners to show them how Africans felt when their relatives get abducted.

That's a powerful gesture, but enormously risky.

Normously risky, yes.

Does he not get punished for that?

As an Essex, so in Pennsylvania, he's not popular with his fellow Quakers. I mean, this is the kind of things that do not make him popular. And his most spectacular stunt of all occurs at the annual assembly of the Philadelphia Friends. So he's left Philadelphia because he regards it as Babylon, but he comes back in for this in 1738. And he walks in, he rises to his feet, he smooth back his coat, he draws out a sword. You're not allowed to take a sword, obviously, into a meeting place. He's hidden it in his clothes.

So it's a Quaker meeting, yeah, a Quaker meeting place, yeah.

So he draws out his sword. This is immediately shocking to all the Quakers who are pacifists.

And he says that he is there to protest against the enslavement of Africans.

And he says that the transportation and enslavement of people from Africa is as justifiable in the sight of the Almighty who beholds and respects all nations and colors of men with an equal regard as if you should thrust a sword through their hearts as I do this book. And he holds up a Bible and then he stabs the Bible with his sword and blood comes spurting out from the Bible. I mean, a spectacular sight. And the blood turns out to be kind of juice, pokeberry juice. I have no idea what pokeberry juice looks like.

They have very peculiar berries in America, don't they?

Perhaps American listeners could describe it. But apparently it looks like blood.

And he's cut out the middle of the Bible and put the juice in. And so it's kind of spectacular stunt. That is a tremendous stunt, I have to say. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, so this is very, very like, you know, people going to the meetings, you know, the kind of public meetings of international institutions and staging protests. Yeah. And again, the impact is all the greater for the fact that no one has ever done anything like this. So unsurprisingly, Benjamin Lay ends up so unpopular with so many influential Quakers that he leaves Abingdon and he goes and lives in a cave where he keeps goats, he farms fruit trees, he spins the flax that makes his own clothes. And in the cave, he stores his library, which is almost 200 books by this point. So he's still, you know, busy reading away. And oddly, having been such a controversial figure, having been treated as a kind of massive annoyance by so many people, as the decades pass, he comes, you know, he gets older and older, frail and frailer, he becomes more and more of a kind of living reproach to people. Yeah. So Benjamin Franklin, he doesn't actually free his slaves, doesn't go that far. But he does draw up a will and it by its terms, the slaves that he does own will be freed on his death. Right. So there's that. Yeah. Finally, on his deathbed, so this is 1759 by this point. So it's about 20 years after he'd done his stunt with the Bible and the poke produce in Philadelphia, news comes to him from another of the annual assemblies of the

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Philadelphia Friends that a vote has been held in it. And it has been agreed that any Quaker who not only owns, but trades and slaves is to be disciplined. So basically, he's one. Right. And he says, I can now die in peace. And he dies shortly afterwards. And, you know, it's an amazing story because although he's largely forgotten now, his example does, I think, clearly play a part in bringing the Quakers of Philadelphia around to opposition to slavery. And the Quakers in Philadelphia are so influential that they then start to have an impact on broader American society. And this therefore is part of what you might call the flame rush of the spirit through Anglo-American Protestantism that, you know, by the early 19th century in Britain ends up resulting in abolitionism, the abolition first of slavery and then of the slave trade.

Because lay when he was growing up, Tom, in the late 17th, early 18th century, this isn't a world in which basically there's no organized abolitionist movement really, is there? I mean, there may be people who are opposed to slavery, but there aren't big campaigns in William III England or something. No, I mean, it's a very, very, very eccentric position. So in the 1670s, there's a Quaker called William Edmondson who goes rather as lay later does, he's gone to Barbados and been horrified by what he sees. And he then goes to the New World and campaigns against institutional slavery. So lay isn't actually, despite our title, the first abolitionist. But what lay does is to really, really kind of employ stunts, employ activism as a means for campaigning against it and has this impact. And is he remembered by later anti-slavery activists? Or did it take historians to kind of drag him out of obscurity, would you say?

Well, so Robert's Vokes, the Quaker who wrote the biography of him, does remember him. But no, I mean, the memory of him fades. A painting of him was found quite recently. So I'm sure both of us will put the picture of him.

I have to say it's a pretty extraordinary painting, Tom. I mean...

Yeah. I mean, he looks like something from a kind of brother's grim.

Yeah. Illustration.

But I think people are more interested in him now for obvious reasons.

Of course.

Because he does seem a kind of a forebearer of a lot of the character of activism, both in terms of Black Lives Matter, but also extinction rebellion that's happened over the past few years.

So I'm just looking at memorials to him. There's a Benjamin Lee room at the Friends' House in London, which is the Great Quaker headquarters. And there is a marker by his grave in Appington by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

But that was only put up in 2018.

Yeah. You know, he's a recent find.

Yeah. And there's no statue. And there could be... I mean, without being mean to Benjamin Lee, a statue of Benjamin Lee would be cheaper than a statue of Goliath.

So I suppose it would depend on what scale it was built.

But yes, he'd be a very good candidate, I think, for a statue.

I'm trying to imagine the statue competition that involved a final between Goliath and Benjamin Lee. Anyway.

Well, I don't think Goliath is going to get one.

No, I don't think he is.

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No, Philistines.

No, he's a very...

So I think he's a fascinating figure in himself. But obviously, I mean, he's interesting as a...

Oh, he's, yeah, he's incredibly interesting.

A way into understanding both the nature of slavery in the British Caribbean.

Yeah.

And also the reason why in the long run, it comes to be abolished.

And just to emphasize how radical that process of change is, because I think the problem for us today is that we are so much the children of Benjamin Lee. We so 100% accept that he's right. It seems so obvious to us that he's right, that it's hard for us to kind of think back into a world where basically everyone takes slavery for granted.

You know, it's not just Europeans. It's Africans who are doing the selling.

It's the Muslims who are buying them as well.

I mean, this is pretty much a kind of universal assumption in the Atlantic world.

There's no problem with slavery.

And that is why Leigh is such a heroic figure, such a radical figure.

Yeah. I think what makes his story so resonant.

What's so interesting is that so often we sort of struggle to comprehend what's going on in the 17th century or something, when let's say, you know, all these people at the court of Charles II or James II, they're all investing in slavery businesses. And so the temptation in the 21st century is to say, well, there must have been just wicked people, incredibly evil people.

And it's sometimes hard to sort of explain that everybody did this. I mean, pretty much...

Well, it's like people now investing in stocks and shares, you know, in any financial market.

It's very difficult.

All those people who listen to this podcast who have a pension, you know, do you know what your pension is? Your pension invested in companies that in 300 years time, our descendants will find repellents. And they'll say, how could they willfully blind themselves?

You know, in the way that in the 18th century, an awful lot of people, well, the vast majority of people in Britain, would almost have willfully not been interested in what was going on in Barbados or the Caribbean. They wouldn't have bothered to find out.

Yeah. I mean, the thing that's striking is Leigh's idea that it should be possible in a sense to kind of morally disinvest yourself from that.

Yeah.

But he takes it to very radical extremes. I mean, he goes and lives in a cave and he keeps a goat.

I don't think many of us are going to do that. But I think what's the most powerful thing he did was actually that image of the sugar, that line that you had, Tom, well, you had, I mean, that he had, about the sugar that is full of the grease, dirt, dung and other filthinesses, and maybe limbs, bowels and excrements of the poor slaves. And that idea, I mean, because the sugar is white, isn't it? You know, the sort of...

Yeah. There's a sort of image of purity of sugar and the idea that it's staying not just with blood, but with the very bodies of the people who have been, yeah, who have suffered so dreadfully to make it. I mean, that must have been very powerful and you would think incredibly shocking.

Yes.

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To all these, you know, Jane Austen type people in Britain who are kind of putting sugar in their tea or whatever.

Yes. And, you know, that dissenting tradition, the Methodists and so on who start to campaign against sugar, who refuse to have sugar with it. You know, I mean, that sense of kind of increasing boycotts is a ramification of that.

Yeah. Golly, quite a simultaneously horrifying and quite stirring episode of The Rest of the Sister there, Tom.

Yes.

And I think we can say, Benjamin Lay, definitely a greater man than Goliath, a friend of the show, I think, Tom.

Let's enroll him as a friend of the show.

Yeah.

Thanks very much for listening.

Goodbye.

Bye-bye.

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